

CHAPTER TWO

Incantations:

Attuning to the Healing Spirits

— The Missionaries Arrive —

Ironically, the Christian missionaries, who brought the 'new religion from the East' to the wooded landscapes of western Europe, are among the most important of our sources of information about the indigenous peoples and how they lived. For the purposes of the rediscovery of the wisdom of Wyrð, the early missionaries and monks were like ancient anthropologists, observing, reporting, and writing about the tribal cultures within which they lived (and of course many of the missionaries were themselves from those tribes, though sometimes going abroad for religious training).

Unlike anthropologists the monks made no claim to 'academic objectivity', for they had an objective of their own: to convert the natives of western and northern Europe to Christianity. But balancing the natural and predictable bias of their observations is the fact that they had a practical need to understand the beliefs and practices around them, so that they could set about converting the people. This gives a pragmatic edge to their writings; I believe that their observations accurately report the things they saw, even if they were intent on condemning them as evil, and therefore reported their findings in language which reflected their task.

The response of the indigenous peoples to the first arrival of the missionaries is revealing; it tells us a lot about the nature of the existing beliefs. Aethelbert, chieftain of the native population of south-east England, insisted that his first meeting with the missionaries should be in the open air; if they were black magicians they would have less chance of harming him than if they were inside a building, where they 'might deceive him by surprise, prevailing against him'.¹

Pope Gregory of Rome had sent the missionaries, led by a monk called Augustine with a party of about forty monks and assistants, early in the year 597. They were rowed across the English Channel, and the natives allowed them to land on the island of Thanet, just off the coast of Kent. The monks asked to speak to Aethelbert, a powerful chieftain.

King Aethelbert was not Christian, and neither were his subjects, but he was a sophisticated and worldly man, and knew what he was facing, for he was married to a Christian, the daughter of the King of Paris. Aethelbert allowed his wife to worship at a little church which had been built near Canterbury centuries earlier by the Romans when they occupied the island. Early Celtic Christianity had survived in isolated monasteries, and they had been allowed to continue as practising monasteries, although the monks seemed to carry out little or no missionary activity. But the arrival of Augustine and his band signalled the beginning of a renewed assault from Rome, a fresh attempt to 'convert the natives'.

Bede tells us that King Aethelbert, on hearing of the arrival of the missionaries, ordered that they be treated with courtesy, and be provided with shelter and hospitality. Nevertheless he played it safe, just in case the priests of this new religion had powers they might use against him; he may well have been advised by his own shamans to exercise caution by insisting that the missionaries remain on the island, where he would go to meet them. It seems certain that Aethelbert must have taken with him one or more indigenous shamans to inspect these interlopers.

Bede tells us that: 'the monks . . . approached the king carrying a silver cross as their standard, and the likeness of our Lord and Saviour painted on a board. First of all they offered prayer to God, singing a litany for the eternal salvation both of themselves and of those for whose sake they had come.'²

Having regaled Aethelbert with their litany, they called upon him to forsake his ways of error and be baptised into the Christian faith; it is recorded that Aethelbert declined their invitation. However, he was very generous to them, allowing them to come off the island and to enter the mainland of Kent, providing them with a house in Canterbury, and making available to them the little church as a base

for their worship. He also, remarkably, gave the monks licence to engage in missionary activity, telling them that they may seek to 'win unto the faith of your religion with your preaching as many as you may'.

This is a tolerant welcome, especially when we consider what happened: Christianity, with the backing of Rome, accomplished a takeover of the spiritual life of England, at least in law if not in popular practice. It has been suggested that perhaps the extant ways of sacred practice were weak, or fading, and that the missionaries found a ready audience for their proselytising. I think that the truth is likely to be very different, and it is worth considering what happened a little more closely for the illuminating light it casts on to the indigenous attitudes towards the sacred.

— The Response of the Indigenous Peoples —

Aethelbert, as the chieftain responsible for first allowing the missionaries on to the island, clearly saw them for what they were. Although his wife was Christian, and through her he had dealings with the Christian King of Paris, he nevertheless did not welcome the missionaries as envoys from friends. He kept them first on the Isle of Thanet, where he met them in the open air. It may have been merely a checking of 'passports', letters of introduction from Rome and so on, to be sure that they had indeed come with the blessing of the Pope. There may also have been some diplomatic, trade or military considerations: connections with Pope Gregory would have been extremely useful and influential for a regional, tribal chieftain of part of England.

But in understanding the open attitude to the preaching and politicking of the missionaries, it is important to realise that the awareness of the sacred which characterised the indigenous practices was integrated with all elements of life, and did not constitute what we now think of as an official religion. There were mystics who mediated with the spirits, conducted the celebrations and calendar customs in honour of gods and goddesses, carried out shamanic healing, and so on. But it was not a centrally organised institution, with dogma to impart and

souls to convert. When initially encountered, a religion like that of the Christians must have seemed to many of the indigenous tribespeople, used to a multitude of gods, goddesses and spirits, like an optional extra, another god to add to the pantheon of sacred beings.

Beyond this, I also believe that the deep underlying nature of the way of Wyrð matches closely what has been identified as the attitude of early Native American tribes to the incoming of Christianity. Historian of religion Joseph Epes Brown suggests that Native American ways of the spirit meant that 'all forces of the experienced natural environment can communicate to man the totality of what is to be known of the sacred mysteries of creation, and thus of the sacred essence of being and beings'.³ Beliefs and practices were closely identified with direct experience; the sacred was not an ideology, or debating point. Each person's experience of the spiritual was respected, and so, in Epes Brown's words, when the Christian message came to the people through 'dedicated missionaries who led exemplary and sacrificial lives, the people easily understood the message and example because of the profundity of their own beliefs'.

Epes Brown proposes that the historical phenomenon represented by the adoption of Christianity by indigenous peoples is not one of 'conversion' as understood exclusively by bearers of Christianity; it is simply a continuation of the people's ancient and traditional practice of open sacred attunement. Study of the process of conversion in early Europe gives the same impression, although this open integration of spiritual views was not to last, for as the organised Christian Church grew in power, it began to outlaw the ancient practice of Wyrð.

The so-called conversion of the kings, advocated by Rome in the belief that the populace would follow their leaders into the fold, was a tenuous and fragile arrangement. Frustrations abounded for the missionaries. For one thing there was the annoying propensity of 'converts' to relapse to their indigenous practices. For example, King Redwald of East Anglia, who had agreed to be baptised into Christianity, relapsed, reportedly owing to the influence of his heathen wife. The result was that 'in the same temple he had an altar to sacrifice to Christ, and another small one to offer victims to the devils',⁴ the devils being, of course, indigenous deities!

Eventually, over time, more warrior kings converted to Christianity, sometimes out of genuine faith, more often for the links it provided with the power of Rome. But the populace did not follow the example of their kings, unless 'officially' baptised by royal order. At first, the kings of the late Dark Ages who had become Christian tolerated the continuing presence of Wyrd; or rather, they had to. The attitude of the indigenous populace to the imperatives of baptism hardly came from the heart.

One wonderful example of the purely pragmatic approach to conversion is the response of a Saxon seaman to the Christian missionary practice of, having captured pirates at sea, offering them the choice of accepting baptism into the faith or being put to death. The historical annals record that this pirate, when confronted by the proposition, opted for baptism, saying 'that he had no objection; he had been baptised nineteen times before, and supposed that the twentieth would not hurt him.'⁵

Missionaries tried to accommodate some of the indigenous views, and sometimes were minded to do so because they themselves still had a sneaking belief in many of the elements of the pre-Christian sacred ways. There are stories of missionaries having to deal with the indigenous 'heathen' spirits, and taking it seriously. Even as recently as the thirteenth century, the Icelandic Bishop Gudmund Arason was reckoned to have had great power among trolls:

He was once, it is said, going over the steep little holm of Drangey, blessing it and casting out the trolls, when, after they had done their worst, there came a petition from them in reasonable terms. In his purification of the island, which was carried out very thoroughly, he was let down by a rope over the cliffs to bless them. At one place a shaggy grey arm in a red sleeve came out of the rock with a knife, and cut two strands of his rope: the third strand was hallowed and would not give and the bishop hung there.

Then a voice from the rock said: 'Do no more hallowing, bishop; the Bad folk must live somewhere.' The bishop had himself hauled up, and left that corner as a reservation for trolls, so it is said.⁶

—The Missionaries Appropriate Indigenous Customs —

In general, the deliberate policy of the Church to effect conversion with the least possible disturbance was to tolerate and absorb as much of the indigenous practice as they could bear, to make it more likely that the natives would accept the new religion. Thus Pope Gregory, writing in AD 601 from Rome to Mellitus, assistant to Augustine, one of the missionaries sent under the protection of Rome to convert the English tribespeople, says: 'Tell Augustine what I have determined upon after mature deliberation on the affairs of the English: namely that the temples . . . ought not to be destroyed, but let the idols that are in them be destroyed; let holy water be . . . sprinkled in the said temples, let altars be erected and relics placed.' Thus 'the nation . . . may the more familiarly resort to the places to which they have been accustomed . . . For there is no doubt that it is impossible to efface everything at once.'⁷

Because the Christian churches were usually built of stone, in contrast to the pagan sacred enclosures which were, if constructed rather than being a naturally occurring sacred site, made of wood, some accommodation had to be made by the Christians. To this end the common folk were allowed by Gregory 'to build themselves huts of the boughs of trees about those churches which had been turned to that use from temples, and celebrate the solemnity with religious fasting, and no more offer beasts to the Devil'.

The times of the pagan ceremonies and those of the Church festivals were made to coincide: the heathen feast at the winter solstice became identified with Christmas, and so on. The churches themselves were used in ways that symbolised the transference of sacred practices from Wyrd to Christ. Because the north was regarded as the abode of the heathen gods, the north side of the churchyard was not used for burials until the south side was full — except that the north side could be used from the start for burying suicides and murderers.

Also the north door, to be found in most Anglo-Saxon and early Norman churches, is said to be the one built so that a person could be

brought into the church through it for baptism, signifying the change from pagan to Christian influence about to be effected.

And this in essence is what happened to the shamans of the indigenous Wyrd peoples. For the Rome-backed missions to England targeted the tribal chiefs and warrior kings for conversion. Over the next centuries, some royal courts were converted, some affected a conversion by adding the Christian God to their pantheon of 'pagan' deities, while others became nominally Christian and later reverted to their pre-Christian Wyrd. But the long-term effect was to replace the male shamans, or to drive them underground, and supplant them as advisers to the kings and leaders of sacred ceremony with Christian priests. However, the evidence suggests that the general populace remained, for the most part, committed to their traditional beliefs and practices.

So later, when its continuing vitality among the peasantry could not be usurped by stealth, Wyrd was marginalised, suppressed and finally outlawed. The practice of certain rituals, celebrations, sacred acts of Wyrd were punishable by death. Those elements of it that could be appropriated were recast as aspects of Christian practice; those that could not be accommodated were suppressed with a brutality which reached its culmination in the witch-burning of the Middle Ages.

The hostility of official Christianity towards the indigenous Wyrd practices, and its attempts to replace and suppress native customs, is important here principally because it is largely through the Christian recording in writing of their condemnation of folk beliefs and customs that we have discovered so much about them. Let us explore, a thousand years on, some of the things that the Christian functionaries wrote about the sacred ways of our ancestors.

— Dominion —

Wulfstan was Archbishop of York from AD 1002 to 1023, a tough time for a Christian. Many English warlords and aristocracy had converted to Christianity, but the great mass of people living on the land and even in the villages and towns were still practising the sacred rituals of Wyrd; indeed these had been given a shot in the arm by the invasions of the Vikings and their reintroduction of 'pagan' ways.

Wulfstan composed a large body of directives which railed against the Wyrd, saying deprecatingly of the indigenous shamans: 'they took it as wisdom to worship the sun and moon as gods on account of their shining brightness . . . Some men also said that the shining stars were gods and began to worship them earnestly; and some believed in fire on account of its sudden heat, some also in water, and some believed in the earth because it nourished all things.' He contrasted these caricatures of indigenous beliefs with the truth according to the gospels: 'But they might have readily discerned, if they had the power of reason, that he is the true God who created all things for the enjoyment and use of us men, which he granted mankind because of his great goodness.'⁸

Today these words have an ominous ring. In a time of ecological reawakening, Wulfstan's early Christian view as man in all his goodness being granted dominion over the Earth is one from which many of us recoil. In modern Christianity some argue for a more aware, and sensitive dominion. Others counter that the assumption of dominion is the root problem: we are *of* the world, not 'in charge' of it. Either way, we are seeking urgently to build new models of human-environment relations, and to transcend the alienating dogma which can be seen already in Wulfstan's sermons a thousand years ago.

In contrast, and in tune with some of the work today to revision our understanding of the environment, the indigenous pre-Christian tribes of Europe saw the natural world as breathing a special kind of life force, a spiritual power. The historian Burckhardt says that: 'The Germanic races, which founded their states on the ruins of the Roman Empire, were thoroughly and specially fitted to understand the spirit of natural scenery.'⁹ For them, features of the environment were suffused with life force and sacred power: trees, rocks, natural springs and wells were expressions of the spiritual realm, and proffered healing powers to those who needed it. The shamans of Wyrd saw spirit energies in the natural features of the landscape, rather than seeing in them the workings of an overall God. And so the Christian missionaries set out to destroy the sacred significance of the landscape in the minds and hearts of the people.

But, Burckhardt explains: 'though Christianity compelled them for

a while to see in the springs and mountains, in the lakes and woods, which they had till then revered, the working of evil demons, yet this transitional conception was soon outgrown.¹⁰ Revivals of Wyrd in 'converted' ancient Europe were rife, when the populace rebelled against the outlawing of indigenous shamanic practices by newly baptised kings and warrior chiefs.

— Forbidden Wyrd —

Written records of the laws and sermons forbidding Wyrd practices form timeless documentation of the comprehensive activities of our ancestors in engaging with the landscape of which they were a part, including the conducting of spiritual and healing ceremonies at trees, wells and springs, stones, and sacred enclosures, divination, incantations, enchantments with herbs, and the making of vows by fires.

Some of the prohibitions denied religious freedom in the most repressive manner possible. The laws of Alfred, the most prominent and active Christian king of the ninth century, threatened: 'Let him who sacrifices to gods, save God alone, perish by death.'¹¹ Clearly it is not the act of sacrifice which is here being called into question, but the identity of the god to whom the offering is made. And if it were a god of the Wyrd pantheon, the punishment was death.

— Attunements to the Sacred —

But more usually it was the indigenous tribespeople's attunement to the sacred in nature that was attacked by the Church, sometimes through secular law. The laws of King Cnut, for example, 'earnestly forbid every heathenism: heathenism is, that men worship idols, that is that they worship heathen gods, and the sun or the moon, fire or rivers, water-wells or stones, or forest trees of any kind; or love witchcraft, or . . . perform anything pertaining to such illusions'.¹²

Admittedly, 'love witchcraft' adds an intriguing extra dimension to the array of natural phenomena covered by Cnut's condemnation, but the main target of his 'earnestly forbidding' diktat is the attunement to, celebration of, and sacred connection with elements of the land-

scape of which people are a part. In Wulfstan's terms, the true path is to seek to dominate nature, to bend it to our will, since it is provided for our convenience. To acknowledge the importance and special qualities of nature was anti-Christian.

Church penitentials, laying down a raft of actions required in 'penance' from those who were judged to have strayed from the true Christian path, were repressive: anyone who 'sacrifices to demons in little things shall do penance for one year, but if in big things, for ten years. If he shall eat or drink in the vicinity of a heathen shrine or if he shall partake of food which has been used in a heathen sacrifice he shall likewise do penance.'

Being caught participating in a major sacred feast could therefore require ten years of penance, a kind of community-based sentence restricting freedoms as if in a 'penitentiary'. Here it is not so much the act of eating itself which is condemned, for the wine and wafer of communion is to take drink and food as part of a sacred ritual; the problem is that people were doing this act in honour of the spirits of nature, rather than exclusively in honour of the Christian God.

Communicating with the life force of the natural landscape, divining the pattern of future events, and performing healing incantations were forbidden: Edgar, one of the first churchmen to hold high political office in England, urged the priesthood to even greater efforts to stamp out the indigenous spiritual practices: 'we enjoin that every priest zealously promote Christianity and totally extinguish every heathenism, and forbid well-worshipping and necromancies, and divinations and incantations and with sacred circles – and with elders and also with other trees, and with stones.'

Today, a thousand years after Edgar's missive to 'zealously extinguish' every act of indigenous practice, his writings provide a clear idea of the specific ways in which our ancestors related to the features of the landscape, and by implication the general principles which underlay those practices. They believed that waters be regarded as sacred, that areas of wildland be set aside as sanctuaries for ceremony, that trees and stones are containers of sacred power.

Further details are revealed by the proclamations of St Eligius who, in about AD 640, ordered that: 'No Christian place lights at the

temples or at the stones, or at fountains and springs, or at trees, or at places where three ways meet . . . Let no one presume to purify by sacrifice, or to enchant herbs, or to make flocks pass through a hollow tree or an aperture in the earth; for by so doing he seems to consecrate them to the devil.' And we know that sacred bonds and vows were carried out at such places, for an early Christian penitential says: 'No one shall go to trees, or wells, or stones, or enclosures, or anywhere else except to God's church, and there make vows or release himself from them.' The 'enclosures' were circles of trees, or stones, in which a natural shrine was kept.

Clearly the sum total of activities denied, derogated, and made punishable by penance at best, death at worst, provides a remarkable, vivid picture of a highly active indigenous spiritual practice.

— Plants of Enchantment —

Today, tucked into the verges of country roads and spread across the wild fields of lowland England, Wales and Ireland, thrives a herb which stands one or two feet tall, has toothed leaves and bears lilac, five-petalled flowers from July to September. Nectar is secreted below the ovary, and white hairs at the mouth of the corolla tube form a barrier to the explorations of insects. It is called vervain, or verbena, and it features often in the one-thousand-year-old healing concoctions and salves of ancient England. The Christian authorities objected to 'enchantments with herbs' such as vervain. Some of the entries in the Anglo-Saxon *Spellbook*, and other ancient sources, are revealing.

In the Old English version of the *Herbarium* of Apuleius Platonicus (one of the texts from ancient, classical sources), it is recorded that the Anglo-Saxons believed that vervain drove away all poisons and was 'said to be used by sorcerers'. In other words, the herb was part of the mystical practice of indigenous shamans who did in ancient England what shamans all around the world have done since time immemorial: healed. And in the Anglo-Saxon *Spellbook*, with rue, dill, periwinkle, mugwort, betony and other powerful herbs, vervain was an ingredient in a healing salve against the 'demons of disease'.

The medicinal qualities of herbs such as vervain were well known;

ancient European herbal practice used many plants which have, within today's scientific medicine, achieved recognition as having therapeutic qualities, and from which some modern medicines are prepared. We can even recognise the healing qualities of some of the preparations from today's everyday knowledge of medicines: for example, to cure a cough, the Anglo-Saxon *Spellbook* calls for: 'honey droppings and marche seed and dill seed. Pound the seeds small, mix into the droppings to thickness, and pepper well. Take three spoonfuls after the night's fast.' Clearly today we would recognise this as an effective intervention for breaking up congestion.

But although the application of herbal medicines aimed to heal physical ailments directly, it is clear that more was being done. Herbs were being 'enchanted' with incantations and rituals before they were prepared for use as medicines, or as they were administered to the patient. Vervain has retained some of its identity even to the present day as a herb of enchantment: one of its popular names in Wales is 'enchantment herb', or 'wizard's herb'!

— Elves' Arrows —

So vervain was being used by 'sorcerers', and it was thought to be effective against the 'demons' of disease. These demons had a specific identity, for indigenous conceptions of the causes of disease included the idea of 'elf-shot', in which the illness had been caused by the victim having been pierced by the arrows of malevolent elves, the arrows and elves being invisible to the naked eye, though believed visible to the shamans, people with special abilities and training. These theories of illness seem to refer to the 'spirit world' rather than to the material causes of organic illness as we would understand them. And the remedies to be applied by the shamans were aimed at driving the elves' arrows out of the body.

For example, the Saxon *Spellbook* has a concoction which is called, 'for a salve against the race of elves'. It is a preparation which includes a large variety of plants: 'the female hop plant, wormwood, bishop's wort, lupine, vervain, henbane, harewort, viper's bugloss, sprouts of heathberry, leek, garlic, seeds of cleavers, cockle and fennel'. The

Spellbook then instructs the shaman to 'put the herbs in a vessel', enchant them by singing incantations over them, then the mixture is boiled in butter, strained through a cloth, and the resulting salve smeared on the face and painful areas of the body to release the patient from the pain of illness caused by elves.

In England vervain garlands were worn on St John's Eve (a religious occasion established to displace a formerly important pre-Christian Midsummer festival). Another 'St John's plant' was mugwort. Common throughout lowlands in the British Isles, mugwort has divided leaves with tiny red-brown flowers which appear in July and August. Clumps of mugwort three to four feet high grow by roadsides and in hedge bottoms. It was picked, purified and strengthened in the smoke of the bonfires on St John's Eve, and then made into garlands and hung over doors to keep off, we are told, 'all the powers of evil, including the spells of sorcerers'.

But the plant also had special significance in ancient Europe not as a superstitious protection for the general populace against sorcerers, but as a plant used on behalf of the populace by sorcerers and shamans in order to counteract malevolent spells made by other spellcasters. In the Anglo-Saxon *Spellbook* a magical medical incantation called the Lay of the Nine Herbs begins with an incantation to the powers of mugwort:

Have in mind, Mugwort, what you made known,
What you laid down, at the great denouncing.
Una your name is, oldest of herbs, of might
 against thirty, and against three,
Of might against venom and the onflying,
Of might against the vile She who fares through the land.

In the lore of incantations, the number three and its multiples was traditionally employed to construct word magic, to weave a spell, and mugwort was believed to be able to counter such attempts to send malevolent magic. Venom and the onflying, the 'She', refer to the forces of the elves, who were sometimes depicted as agents of the Wyrd Sisters, the forces of the 'She' who determined fate, as I shall explain in a later chapter.

When I first read about these concepts of flying elves and elves' arrows, I thought they were fascinating, but quaint and frankly ignorant. They appeared to superstitiously ascribe spurious causal connections between events based on fantasy; concepts that had been completely supplanted by modern scientific understanding of illness.

But as I pondered the nature of these beliefs, it began to dawn on me that they bore a strange resemblance, after all, to our contemporary lay concepts of illness. For example, it is commonly assumed that illnesses are caused by bacteria or viruses which 'invade' our bodies. These micro-organisms are invisible to the naked eye, but are indeed visible to trained specialists who, in place of the 'spirit vision' of ancestral shamans, have microscopes to enhance their perceptual capacities. There is a strangely compelling parallel between the micro-organisms and the arrows.

And when we are ill from these 'invasions', we go to a doctor, one of these people who during training has indeed seen these invisible invaders, who prescribes for us a medicine concocted out of our sight, and containing substances which for the most part we, as lay people, do not know, indicated by an unreadable Latin name.

Even the rituals of taking medicine have some faint resemblance between the cultures. For example, in the Anglo-Saxon *Spellbook*, to cure a neck tumour, the manuscript instructs the healer to take neckwort, wood-marche, wood-chervil, strawberry runners, boar-throat, cockle, ironhard gathered without iron, farthingwort, butcher's broom, broad-bishopwort and brown-wort. 'Let him collect all these plants, an equal amount of each, three nights before summer sets in, and make them with Welsh ale into a drink. And then, on the eve of the first day of summer, the man who intends to drink that drink must wake all night. And at first cock-crow let him take a drink once, at first dawn a second drink, at sunrise a third drink. And let him rest thereafter.'

The admonition to begin the healing on 'the eve of the first day of summer' must apply to the spiritual forces of the plants rather than to their material qualities. But the form of the instructions sound familiar, for when we receive the medicine, we are instructed to take it according to a detailed ritual: e.g. in a five ml spoon, three times a day,

immediately after meals. Not so colourful as 'on the eve of the first day of summer' and 'at first cock crow', but nevertheless perhaps possessing some ritual potency in its very specificity.

No matter how tenuous some of them are, these parallels of form, even when the content seems radically at variance, have encouraged me to believe that in our basic ways of seeing the world we are not so far away from that of our ancestors as we normally assume. And that makes it all the more likely that we are able to learn from some of those aspects of our ancestors' belief system which do differ from our own, for their system is not entirely alien to us.

However, although there is a way in which we can see a parallel between the conception of illness of our ancestors and our own ideas today, this is only at the biologically based realm of understanding. We can see from the way in which the herbs were addressed by 'incantations' that they had a sacred nature, as well as a practical status as medicinal plants.

Certainly the sacred nature and spirit power of these enchantments were recognised by the early Christian authorities, and they developed invocations for disarming the plants of their powers. For example, St Hildegard, a twelfth-century nun, feared the indigenous sacred plants; talking of the mandrake: 'When it is dug out of the earth, at once let it be put into running water for a day and a night, and thus all ill and evil humour which is in it is expelled, so that it is thus no longer of value for magical purposes. But when it is uprooted from the ground, if then it is laid down with the earth adhering to it which has not been removed . . . then it is an evil agent for much hurtful magic.'¹³

So from this negative Christian view we can see that the mandrake plant, used for healing purposes by Wyrð shamans, was believed to retain its healing power only while still in contact with the earth. But since it was the indigenous healers who employed this power, rather than Christian monks, it was depicted as 'hurtful magic' by Hildegard. Despite their derogation of indigenous shamanic practices, as for example St Eligius's exhortation in AD 640 that 'no-one enchant herbs', we know that the practice continued.

Celandine is a commonly growing perennial, one to two and a half

feet high, with yellow, four-petalled flowers and much-divided hairless leaves. It is a member of the poppy family and is easily identified by the drop of poisonous, deep orange latex which is exuded if a stem is broken. This was once used as a cure for warts, and was also believed to be a cure for sore eyes. In the Anglo-Saxon *Spellbook*, the plant gatherer is instructed to: 'Dig round a clump of celandine root, and take with thy two hands turned upwards, and sing thereover nine Paternosters; at the ninth, at "Deliver us from evil", wrench it up; and take from that shoot and from others to make a little cup full, and then saturate them, and let him be fomented by a warm fire; he will soon be better.'¹⁴

The spell seems to indicate that the stems be broken and the juice milked until a small cupful is obtained, and then the stems saturated, or covered with water. The patient takes the concoction and sits by the warmth of a fire. This incantation, obviously Christianised, almost certainly involved the enchantment of the plants by singing the incantations nine times (sacred to the pagans) over the plant before digging it up.

And so vervain was Christianised (confirming its continued use among the populace as a sacred herb), as in a prayer which made it a plant of Calvary: 'Hallowed be thou, Vervain, as thou growest in the ground, For in the mount of Calvary there thou was first found. Thou healedest our Saviour Jesus Christ, and stanchest his bleeding wound; In the name of the Father, the Son, and the holy Ghost, I take thee from the ground.'

Clearly this is meant as a Christian prayer to be used by the indigenous people as they picked the plant for 'magical medicine', hopefully as a step in their conversion to Christianity, to replace the Wyrð incantations. Further, the recorder of this charm wrote that the vervain was picked, crossed with the hand, and blessed with the charm, and then worn against 'blasts', a general category of illnesses caused by 'ill winds'. From the praising lines, the indication of the herb's power in staunching bleeding wounds, and in the making the sign of the cross over the herb and blessing it with 'the charm', we get some idea of the detailed process of 'enchantment'.

— Plant-Collecting Rituals —

The indigenous peoples of Wyrd collected their herbs and plants with great care, sometimes observing strictures concerning the location for collecting, the phase of the moon, and the particular individuals who were allowed to cut the plants from the ground.

This picture is further coloured by the evidence of the Roman writer Pliny, reporting on the Celtic tribes in Britain.¹⁵ Pliny explains that the Celts gathered vervain at sunrise after a sacrifice to the Earth 'as an expiation'. And the maladies for which vervain was used by the Celtic tribes were similarly not always of an organic nature, but more to do with psyche or spirit: Pliny says that they believed that 'When it was rubbed on the body all wishes were gratified; it dispelled fevers and other maladies; it was an antidote against serpents; and it conciliated hearts.'

There were various other procedures and taboos in collecting sacred plants, common to most ancient tribal groups. For example, Pliny also describes a herb which the Celts collected called selago (which they believed 'preserved one from accident, and its smoke when burned healed maladies of the eye') and explains that they culled it without the use of iron, and after a sacrifice of bread and wine. The person gathering it wore a white robe and went with unshod, freshly washed feet.

And yet another plant, samolus, which was placed in drinking troughs as a remedy against disease in cattle, was culled by a person fasting, and with the left hand only; it must be wholly uprooted, and the gatherer must not look behind him.

Clearly, beyond any possible, but unlikely, basis of chemical contamination of the plant chemicals by using iron to dig it up, the rituals of plant gathering and preparation for the tribal peoples had to do with the 'spirit' of the plant rather than any material aspects that we would recognise today.

The rituals used in gathering these plants were extensive including, in the above list, fasting, washing and keeping the feet bare, wearing white, not using iron, using the left hand only, uprooting the whole plant, collecting at sunrise, not looking over the shoulder, maintain-

ing silence, and sacrificing to the plant in 'expiation'.

Expiation to whom? Or what? The plant? Many of these practices were, as I have said, later incorporated into Christian worship in order to render a new and alien religion familiar, user-friendly. The Wyrd shamanic practice of giving thanks to the plant being picked or harvested was incorporated into the Christian fold by prayer, in which thanks and praise were accorded to the plants and to the powers of the Earth: 'Ye [herbs] whom earth, parent of all, hath produced . . . this I pray, and beseech from you, be present here with your virtues, for she who created you hath herself promised that I may gather you with the goodwill of him on whom the art of medicine was bestowed, and grant for health's sake good medicine by grace of your powers.'¹⁶

It is remarkable that in this prayer, the source of creation of the herb was credited to the Earth in her feminine aspect apparently, for it refers to the 'she who created you' rather than to the masculine God of Christianity. Further, the plant is addressed directly, as an indigenous shamanic tradition, rather than addressing God about the plant and asking Him for His strength and blessing to be applied to the plant (as in another incantation turned into a prayer directed to God: 'Whatsoever herb thy power do[th] produce, give, I pray, with goodwill to all peoples to save them and grant me this my medicine'). The 'him on whom the art of medicine was bestowed' was in this case the shaman about to collect the herb. His direction of his thought, and heart, is to the herb he is addressing; the sacred presence he is 'expiating' is the feminine aspect of Earth: Mother Earth.

— Meditation on Plants —

Our ancestors regarded plants as special entities unto themselves, rather than as merely the 'plant materials' of today. They knew the plants to have direct organic effects, as a medical herbalism, but they were also believed to work on other levels, in other ways, to do with the spirit and the gods. No distinction seems to have been made between these two realms: plant medicines, and the sicknesses they addressed, were seen as existing simultaneously on a physical and a

spiritual level. In this regard, the collecting and preparation of plants, the respecting of the plant and the offer of some 'sacrifice' in return for its benefaction, was a kind of active meditation, an attuning to the language of spirit as expressed through plants.

Today most of us do have a sense of the wonder of nature, although it is often mediated so that we encounter nature as spectators. We see, for example, the mysteries of nature being teased apart, revealed, in science documentaries on television, in which the processes of plant life are illustrated by time-release photography so that we can view the movement of the plants through their daily cycle, or even life cycle, at the speed of animal movement. Such images help us acknowledge that the plant world has movement, a rhythm of its own, but on a time scale that puts it outside our direct apprehension. When we see this movement speeded up we are able to identify with the plant more immediately, more closely.

For our ancestors, the shamans were expected to be attuned to the plants, to understand their otherworldliness. The altered states of consciousness of the shaman, the spiritual sensitivity of which shamans were possessed, provided for them a vision of the plant realm, and of the sacred presence in that world. The impeccably detailed rituals for collecting plants, and the complexity and specificity of their preparation into salves and other concoctions, are evidence enough that the shamans of old journeyed in their own way into the wonders of nature, its spirit and power.

Today we rely on plants all the time: the oxygenating of the Earth by the Amazon rainforest; the use of plant substances for making medicines; plants as food for us and for the animals that we eat; the restful and uplifting qualities of plants when given to us as bouquets of flowers, as a gift, an expression of love; as a healing presence, even if only in an aesthetically pleasing sense, when flowers are taken to patients in hospital; the use of flowers in sacred rituals as in bouquets and garlands at weddings; and as accompaniment to the Otherworld when they are placed on coffins, and at gravestones. Plants and flowers, in window boxes, gardens, parks, in the wild, accompany us and help us in myriad ways. Even though we appreciate each of these manifestations of plant presence and power, it is in a 'taking it for

granted' sort of way; rarely do we ponder the greater significance of their role in our lives.

But in a personal way, perhaps the high level of awareness, respect and care which our ancestors showed to the plants in their lives might help us to realise their greater significance. One way for us today to make a small step in that direction is to work to relate, as an active meditation, with a particular plant. It could be in a park, for example, and be visited often. But even better if the plant can be encountered in a more active way, so that one is doing something to acknowledge the plant: a sacrifice, even if only of time to care for it. Probably, for most of us, there are such plants in our lives already, and many people are well aware of the therapeutic pleasures of gardening. But we do not give the matter deep thought. Selecting one plant is a simple meditation of benefit for us today; a small gift of practical awareness from our ancestors.

— The Wyrd of Sun and Moon —

For the people of Wyrd the position of the moon was another extremely important variable in collecting plants for healing purposes for it was believed to influence the state of the plant and its readiness for healing tasks. The Anglo-Saxon *Spellbook* says that the plant periwinkle must be plucked 'when the moon is nine nights old, and eleven nights, and thirteen nights, and thirty nights, and when it is one night old'. The mulberry plant must be picked 'when to all men the moon is seventeen nights old, after the meeting of the sun, ere the rising of the moon'.

This latter specification of the time of night for picking was also common. A manuscript called the *Anglo-Saxon Herbal* prescribes in the case of sea-holly: 'And when thou shalt take up this wort with its roots, then beware that no sun shine upon it, lest its beauty and its might be spoiled through the brightness of the sun.'¹⁷ On the other hand, in another remedy, the bark from ash and oak trees must be taken from the eastern side in order to be efficacious. The east is the side of the rising sun, and perhaps the presence of the sun's heat on the growth of that portion of the tree was a material factor here.

So the alternation of night and day, darkness and light, had significance for the tribespeople's assessment of the state of a plant for collecting. But this is a detailed instance of something which manifested itself much more widely in the lives of our ancestors. The moon and sun were of symbolic significance in that they represented a fundamental polarity which permeated every sector of life, and which underlay an understanding of the balance of forces in our cosmos which is akin to the Eastern principles of yin and yang.

Although there was undoubtedly an element of worship, with its implications of awe, reverence, even love for the sun and moon, these heavenly bodies were not regarded as gods. But they did have a view, a perspective, which is fascinating for us, for in some ways the influence of the sun and moon has not altered in the fifty or so generations since the time of the Wyrð peoples; what has altered is our awareness of these influences.

In the culture of Wyrð, the passage of time was often measured in nights, and longer time spans in moons, as did the Native American peoples until much more recent times. But this counting by the moon was not simply a unit of time passed, metered out in equal measures of no particular significance, like our minutes, hours, and days. Each stage of the moon had a presence which could be felt, was acting upon the land, and upon people. We know this to be the case today, of course. The moon moves the oceans into tides, and if it can directly affect huge bodies of water, then it can certainly affect us, since we are composed of at least sixty per cent water; at least this would seem to be true in principle. Since we rarely attend to the moon's influence over our lives, there has never been a systematic programme of research on the matter.

Stories were told about the sun and moon in tribal lore. In one account there first was a woman called Night. She married a god called Shining One, and they had a son called Day. Here Night represents the feminine, Shining One (sun) the masculine, and between them they produced Day, who was also masculine. Note that for the people of Wyrð, night came first. Night was primary, the most important phase of our rhythm in which in deep darkness the imagination roams, when external images are no longer visible, and internal images

come to the fore. The secondary realm of day was for more prosaic mental functions, the analytical considerations of the material world.

We have today lost the balance in our lives between these two states. Night for us is the time when we use our imaginations for recreation, as in films, theatre, and television, but psychologically it has lost its importance as a symbol of the deep imagination on a par with analytical modes of being. We value much more highly our analytical, daytime states of mind, when we can 'see what is really there' and 'get things done'. And so our lives are relatively uninformed by the intelligence of night, the power of the imaginal, the states of mind that soar when the constraints of a consensually negotiated, objective, material world are lifted.

The duality, balance, polarity was important.¹⁸ And as the day consisted of night and day, so the year consisted of winter and summer. The year began on 31 October, All Hallow's Eve, and this marked the beginning of winter, a position on the calendar celebrated with great festivals. Winter is the dark side of the year, nature is asleep, it is a time for dreams. Then the first day of May brought in the summer, as night brings in day. Summer months were those of outdoor activities, of crop farming and animal husbandry, land clearing and building. These two festivals divided the year into two halves of six months each. Even the months themselves were made up of two parts, in the first of which the days are numbered up to fifteen and in the second up to fourteen or fifteen according to the length of the month. As in Indian and other calendars, one half was the 'bright half' of the lunar month, the other the 'dark half'.

The dividing lines between the contrasting periods of time, whether night and day, first and second halves of months, halves of the year, were charged by a power in which the fundamental principles of life and death were in balance. These liminal moments, spaces of time, were to be entered with care, and often marked with ritual attunement. Certain acts were forbidden at sunrise and at sunset because these were moments of danger; on the other hand, as we saw above, morning dew and morning water had a particular virtue, and cures could be effected by remedies sought at sunset.

This supernatural power is present in its most potent form on

November Eve and May Eve, the joints between the two great seasons of the year. These two eves (together with Midsummer's Eve) were known as 'spirit nights' and were propitious moments for the practice of divination.

In another story, the Allfather, the original sky god from early Wyrd culture, took Night and her son Day, and gave to each of them a horse and chariot and put them in the sky, so that they should ride around the world every twenty-four hours. Night rides first on a horse called Frosty-Mane, and showers of water droplets from the mane create the night dew on the surface of the Earth. Day's horse is called Shining-Mane and the whole earth and sky are illumined by the flow from his mane.¹⁹

Alternatively, the chariots are driven by Moon and Sun, who are depicted as being chased through the sky by powerful wolves who represent wildness, untamed forces, entropy and chaos. And one day one of the wolves will catch the moon and, in the words of one of the poems, 'he will swallow the moon and bespatter the sky and all the air with blood. Because of this the sun will lose its brightness, and the winds will then become wild and rage on every side.'²⁰ It is an image of the end, the time when we humans lose our balance, our attunement to both the bright and dark sides of life, and are overwhelmed by the chaos that ensues. The vision is remarkably like our nightmare conception of a nuclear holocaust: deep red sky, then darkness as the sun is blotted out, mighty winds raging on every side. Death. The vision is timeless.

The Wyrd tribespeople ascribed importance to attunement, harmony and balance between the great polarities, the forces that shape our lives. One way in which they did this was in their crop rituals.

— Festivals of the Sun and Moon —

The Earth's fertility, the fecundity with which it had 'babies', be they animal, human, crops, fruit and so on, was of prime importance in the subsistence economy of ancient Europe. This concern was expressed partly through an intimate knowledge of, and involvement in, the cycle of the seasons, the months, the weather, but also an awareness of the sacred dimension. In the spring, through dramatic metaphor,

their rituals attuned to the heat of the sun and the cool of the moon in drawing sprouting seedlings from the ground.

Sun and moon festivals took place at high points in the agricultural cycle, and Bonser reports that in ancient times in Europe there were traditions which survived until very recently, especially in Germany, in which the ceremonial to bring fertility and a blessing for the coming year was about the time of the vernal equinox, and not later than 25 March.²¹

We know something of the complex ritual through the inclusion in the Anglo-Saxon *Spellbook* of, among other things, a contemporary detailed account of a shamanic invocation for fertility of the fields. This ceremony affords a remarkable glimpse of the sacred world of our ancestors; a ritual entirely comparable to the religious services around the world today.

The entire ceremony began in the cool dark of night, before dawn, and reached its climax in the rays of the setting sun at the end of the day. The activities have three aims: relating to the sun and its power over the vitality of the grass fields; invocations in honour of Mother Earth to bless the crops; and protection of the crops from damage by hostile magicians.

The *Spellbook* is clear: 'at night before daybreak take four sods from four sides of the land and mark how they stood before'. In the early hours of the morning, by the light of bright moonlight or fire torches, chunks of earth were dug up, and markers placed on them so that they could be restored later to the holes in their original positions. Still in the hours before dawn, the shaman then takes 'oil and honey and yeast and milk of all the cattle that are on the land, and part of every kind of tree growing on the land, except hard trees, and part of every well-known herb, except burdock only, and pour moonglow dew on them, and then let it drip three times on the bottom of the sods'.²²

This is an incredible recipe. Days of preparation would be needed for collecting 'part of every kind of tree and well-known herb on the land' to enable elements of the vegetation of the land to be joined together in sacralised and ritualised form. Hard trees such as oak and beech are excluded, perhaps because they are slow-growing and are

not therefore appropriate for encouraging the fertility spirit of fast-growing crops.

Moonglow dew was a sacred liquid. It sprinkled on to the Earth at night, a result of the overflow from the daily nourishing of the World Tree by the Wyrd Sisters, three sacred beings who symbolised the heart of the cosmos. And since swarming bees are represented in early European literature as the Wyrd Sisters, so the honey may also be an image of their nurturing presence. Milk and honey are offerings to the Earth in many ancient societies, and the Anglo-Saxons here added yeast and oil. 'At the first ploughing the Indians, like the Germans, offered as sacrifice milk and honey into the fields, and the Romans poured mead and honey into the earth when they dug up any herb.'²³ Oil, honey, yeast and milk were all catalysts used in cooking and fermentation; in other words, processes in which the bounty of the land was prepared and transformed for people to eat and drink. This spell itself is like a recipe, with tips for the ways in which the ingredients should be combined for maximum benefit.

The sods of earth and grass were then sprinkled three times (a sacred number) with water and the shaman chanted: 'Grow, and multiply, and fill the Earth.' In the *Spellbook*, written by Christians, the account of the ceremony has the sods being taken to a church and placed with their grassy sides facing towards the altar, while masses were sung. But historians agree that the mass is a later Christian substitution, or even just an interpolation by the Christian author of the manuscript. In the original ceremony it is likely that the sods would be taken to a sacred site, a forest sanctuary or stone circle, where they could be placed so that the first rays of the sun would strike upon the grass, and incantations would be sung rather than a mass.

The shaman then made rune-staves of slivers of 'quickbeam' (aspenwood), small strips of wood on which were engraved sacred symbols. With appropriate rune-messages carved on them he laid the rune-staves on the bottom of each of the four pits formed by cutting away the sods, so surrounding and criss-crossing the field with magical powers. Eventually the pieces of turf were brought back from the sacred site, returned to their original places, and laid on top of the rune-staves. The shaman turned to the east, with his back to the

setting sun, bowed nine times, and chanted this incantation:

To the East I stand, for the gifts of use I pray:
So I pray the Mighty One, so I pray the Great Lord,
So I pray the Holy One, Ward of heaven's kingdom.
Earth I also pray and the heavens above
And the might of heaven and its high-built Hall,
that I may this magic spell, open from my teeth,
through a thought firm-grasped;

Waken up the swelling crops for our worldly need;
Fill the fielded earth, and make the
green fields beautiful.²⁴

In its modern translation, the rhythm of the lines is lost, but the message is clear. The first three lines describe the kind of action the shaman is to carry out, though they look suspiciously like Christian interpolation, for the second three lines really do the business: he is invoking the powers of Earth and sky, and the 'high-built Hall', that is Woden's stronghold, through the words of a magic spell. This is not a prayer, but a formation 'through a thought firm-grasped', of sacred language to bring together the great powers of Earth and sky. And the aim is simple, to make the fields green and swell the crops for a bountiful harvest.

After chanting the incantation the shaman turned about three times 'sunwise', then stretched full length along the ground, chanting for the fields to be green for the benefit of the owner of the land and all those who were subject to him.

Parallel beliefs can be seen reflected in the more recently surviving rituals of some of the Native American peoples. Among the Pueblo Indians, 'the sun, sky, the earth, and corn play prominent roles . . . The sun is very powerful and is usually spoken of as "father" or "old man".' It is prayed to for longevity, as a hunt deity, and its warmth fertilises the field. It makes its daily journey across the sky, reaching its house in the west at sundown. Among the Hopi, planting dates are established by the 'progress of the sun toward the summer solstice; the progress itself is calibrated by the successive positions of the rising sun relative to the landmarks on the horizon. There may be no further planting after solstice.'²⁵

The sun has an equally powerful influence in our contemporary agriculture, of course, but we tend to focus more on the human-generated interventions we have introduced to modify the natural processes: fertilisers, crop sprays, agri-business machinery, and so on. But for indigenous peoples across the Earth, including our own culture a thousand years ago, the task was not one of intervention, but rather one of attunement. A sensitive and sophisticated knowledge of the sun and moon patterns was vital. And anything of great import, of central concern to life, was expressed not only in the material world, but in the spiritual realms too.

One way of heightening this awareness and of taking it beyond the mechanical, the mundane, into the sacred was ceremonies such as the one described above. Of course, spiritual ceremonies of the established religions in today's world are just as heavily symbolic, ritualised and detailed as the field ceremony of the people of Wyrð. But the difference is that, even for people who subscribe to a major religion, the emphasis is more often on personal salvation, not on the external world. For dealing with the machinations of the environment, we depend upon our scientific, head-driven paradigms. We construct cause-and-effect sequences out of the stream of events, a way of apprehending and predicting life processes which lies at the heart of the empirical approach. It has led to scientific farming, with its consequent hugely increased crop yields.

But linear cause-and-effect chains alone are too narrow truly to reflect the unimaginably complex interactions of events and factors in the dynamics of agriculture, nature, life. We try to broaden our understanding, paying attention to events previously thought lateral, tangential and of no consequence. But we simply could not control enough variables, even if we could identify and understand them all, in order to engineer a satisfactorily comprehensive analysis of the processes.

We are surprised and baffled by many of the more complex ecological disasters, and can barely keep up with monitoring them, let alone developing interventions to head off their worst effects. In a world in which the rainforests are being depleted, and the ozone layer disappearing, through our actions, we can hardly have been said to have used our technological knowledge with wisdom.

In approaching a world in which our ancestors experienced layers of meaning, from the physical to the psychological to the sacred, we can do so nowadays in a more open-minded way than we might have some decades ago. For then, we had the arrogance of certainty, of believing that civilisation progresses in historically linear fashion, and that we had solved the problems of the ancients through our technology. We have indeed achieved some wonders, but our technology needs to be embedded in a deeper view of its purpose and its use, a view which might be better informed about the psychological and the sacred, rather than the merely physical, material gain.

We need to rediscover some of our ancestors' sense of an engagement with the environment which goes beyond the mundane, and reach some wisdom of perspective and scale about our ability to intervene in the processes of the natural world in which our technology is rendered puny and dwarfed by the influences of the sun and moon.

— The Monks Do a Rain Dance —

Despite the decrees of Wulfstan, proclaiming the errors of the ways of our indigenous ancestors, not all monks were quite so dismissive, especially when they were desperate. Adomnan, in his *Life of St Columba*, says:

About fourteen years before the date at which we write, there occurred during the spring a very great and long continued drought in the marshy regions . . . We therefore . . . took counsel together, and resolved that some of the senior members of the community [i.e. Iona] should walk round a newly ploughed and sown field, taking with them the white tunic of St Columba, and some books written in his own hand, that they should raise in the air and shake three times the tunic which the saint wore at the hour of his death . . . When these directions had been executed . . . copious rain fell day and night, and the parched earth . . . yielded the same year a most abundant harvest.²⁶

Successful! And if Dark Age monks, locked in battle with indigenous shamans, could profit from borrowing the rituals of Wyrð, then I hope that we can benefit from at least some of their principles.